

DEVILISH



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*For J.W. Keeley, my little piece of hell on earth,
and my friend for all eternity. And Mr. Jones,
wherever he may be.*

Prologue



So this was how it ended. The revelers had deserted, leaving plates of Spanish almonds and sushi and cupcake wrappers. Now there would be no more grand ballrooms with Assyrian kings and pampered dogs and English pop stars and the A3. No more midnight rides through the skies of Providence. No more Calculus II with Brother Frank. No more stolen moments with 116-year-old boys or staring at the golden brick mansion across the fields. It had come back to this mad room of antique perfume bottles and disagreements.

Only a handful of people would understand the real meaning of this event. The general public would be horror-struck. They would wonder how two best friends, two otherwise unassuming girls on the verge of adulthood, could have ended up like this. There would be new specials and magazine articles: ‘Teen Tragedy Stuns Providence,’ ‘Rhode Island Rampage.’ I would be cast as the brainy troublemaker — the angry little blond punk. Allison would be portrayed as my sweet, devoted friend — the one I had

tricked and mislead and taken down this tragic path. The real villain would not appear in the stories at all.

Oh, I had no doubt that they'd blame the whole mess on me, probably just because I had spiky hair and a tendency to talk too much. That was the story of my life. And that life was over.

It doesn't matter how old you are when you die, I'd been told. When you die, that's the right time for you. I'd also been told my life was a small price to pay.

I was glad to pay it for Allison.

My hand fell away from the phone. The room grew dark and I felt myself slipping down the side of the sofa, down to the prized Oriental rug. This was my final move in the game, this graceless thud to the floor. There was only one question left in my mind...

Had I played it right?

two weeks earlier...

Chapter 1



The reviews from the Junior Judges had gone up on the website in the middle of the night. This was how they described me:

JARVIS, JANE; CLASSROOM 2A: If you are trying to find Jane Jarvis, look down. Jane is the shortest person at St. Teresa's, the littlest big. But that tiny body contains a huge brain. We must give this to her. Famously argumentative — we all remember fondly Jane's impromptu speech during last year's 'Celebration of the Spirit of Womanhood' assembly, when she openly debated with the visiting bishop about the rights of women in the church. We like a little less her brittle, bleach blond spikes. A retro no-no in our book. If you are the angry, brainy type, consider Jane. She can be your personal Yoda.

Nothing new there. I went right on to Allison's. The first word struck me, and it was all downhill from there:

CONCORD, ALLISON; CLASSROOM 1A: Forehead first... Allison Concord has a showstopper. We have never seen anything quite like it. It's kind of like an unused billboard or a makeshift landing strip at a small midwestern airport. Sexy. Comparable only to her gums, which are truly a sight to behold. The pinkest smile we've ever seen. She is best known for counting down every second to the junior prom — and then showing up without a date and looking very boo-hoo. Tragic. If you haven't got anyone else for your big and no one else will take on a second...Well, we do what we must.

When there is blood on the water, the sharks will rise to the surface. And Big-Little Day, our yearly celebration of sisterhood, was one of the bloodiest days of the year.

Big-Little Day was a major school benchmark when seniors would officially ask a freshman or a new underclassman to be their 'little.' Enterprising freshmen would actively campaign the most popular seniors, leaving notes and tokens and generally sucking up in a really gross manner. It was a massively big deal to have a good little. Any self-respecting senior, it was understood, had to have at least three freshmen courting them. A few luminaries might have eight or ten offers. And selection was rapid. There was only one forty-five minute period at the start of the day to get it all done. By the end, we were expected to pull off our class rings and pass them to our chosen freshmen, who got to wear them for a day — making the whole thing a little creepily marriage-like as well.

The buildup to this event had been going on since school had started... clandestine meetings in the bathroom between classes, lunchtime congresses, a fury of note taking and illegal texting. But the really serious part was the evaluation by the Junior Judges, a group of self-nominated juniors who offered commentary on all the seniors on the day itself.

No one knew who the first Junior Judges were. The tradition was known to go back as far as the eighties. Back then, they got their message out using photocopied sheets that they stuck in all the freshman lockers. And every year since then, a group of juniors rose up and took on the task.

Even though they were self-chosen, the Junior Judges were hardly anonymous. This year's group was a trio who called themselves the A3. The reason for this is so painfully pretentious that I can barely write it down, and if I really sit down and figure out how it is I even know this, something bad will happen to my head. So I won't do that. I will simply explain that it comes from a size of paper in England called A3, which is really long paper. One of them went to England and discovered this, and they all started joking about how they liked 'really long paper,' as if that actually means something. Combine that with the fact that A generally means the best and the fact that there are three of them: Elsie Fast, Tracey Pils, and Lai Barden. It all comes together into one ready-made nickname. (Awful things like that tend to converge. Know that and you'll be ahead of the game.)

These were the people digging up the past that I had

worked all summer long to bury and cover in concrete. I had gone so far as to turn down a summer job helping to compile research data for my dad at his office at Brown, where he's a professor. It had taken a lot for me to get that job in the first place — including a two-hour interview in which I had to prove that I knew enough math to handle it. And I gave it up. Instead, I made my money at the same summer job that Ally and I had always worked, scooping ice cream in a four-by-five foot fluorescent cell at Dibney's. But this is what you do when your best friend needs you, even if it means chucking away an opportunity that could help you score a scholarship to college.

And the A3 may have just undone it all, simply by being their snarky, haggish selves.

My sister, Joan, was picking all of the green and orange pieces out of her bowl of Froot Loops when I came downstairs. Spread out in front of her were some books and papers. Joan never actually did her homework. I'm not sure Joan actually *knew* that she was supposed to do it — I think she may have been under the impression that she was just supposed to watch over it for the night and make sure nothing happened to it. Every morning, she took it out and checked to make sure that every page was as blank, every problem was as undone, and every answer was just as unwritten as when she'd first taken it under her wing.

'What's a parallelogram?' she asked, peering at her textbook through two Loops she held up to her eyes.

My father was too busy poking at a Sudoku puzzle

to answer. He couldn't leave the house until he did one of the hard ones in under two minutes. My mother never joined our breakfast group because she was always asleep. She worked late managing a very fancy and very good restaurant in town called The Pink Peppercorn, providing us with the world's best leftovers. Which is why I was having a bowl of cold sirloin tips for breakfast.

'It's a four-sided plane,' I said. 'The opposite sides are parallel.'

'A four-sided *plane*?' she repeated. 'Okay, I am *not* falling for that one.'

Joan is two years younger than me. She didn't get into St. Teresa's Preparatory School for Girls. I'm completely used to her looking up at me with that lip-glossy stare of hers and asking questions like, 'Is the Tour de France in Spain?' or, 'Do they make cotton out of plastic?' This is a girl who I had convinced that Alaska used to be called Frigidaire. So sometimes she thought I lied to her.

My father smiled and shook his head. It never bothered him that Joan was like that. While she didn't get my father's savage intelligence or my mother's dexterous common sense, she did get all the height, the muscle tone, and the strong and shiny brown hair. She was lovely and happy, even if she was as intelligent as a rubber band.

Whereas I, as the Junior Judges had so rightly pointed out, was four-foot ten and five-sixths inches (in school shoes) with blond hair, and I looked like an escaped street urchin from *Oliver Twist*. (The hair was dry and brittle because I dyed it with a home-brewed peroxide solution, which worked really well when I first started doing it as

a freshman and couldn't stop because if I used anything else on my hair, it turned a kind of moss-green color.)

Joan set her Froot Loops down and gazed at me evenly.

'You have that look on your face,' she said. 'Are you thinking about Elton?'

My dad glanced up from his puzzle.

'No.' I gave her a silencing look, stiffening my jaw. She knew she wasn't supposed to mention my ex in front of my dad because he would think I was still upset. It had been six months, three weeks, and two days since our breakup. I was over it.

'It's Allison, I said. 'Today is Big-Little Day. I need to make sure she gets a little. This is the first big event since the prom. It means a lot to her. I can't let anything bad happen.'

'Allison will be fine,' my dad chimed in. 'Why would you need to worry about her?'

This was one thing Joan understood completely.

'Ally needs to relax,' Joan said. 'Someone will definitely take her as long as she doesn't get all... you know... spazzy.'

'How do you keep someone from being spazzy?' I asked, pushing aside some mushrooms that had attached themselves to the steaky goodness. 'I know she's great, but she's going to be wound up today. She's going to start breathing fast and get dizzy and scare away the freshmen.'

'You can't worry about something that hasn't happened yet,' my father said, turning back to his Sudoku. 'You have to take life as it comes.'

This irritated me. When I worry about one thing, I

frequently take it out on something or someone else. And the fact that my dad was offering stupid and totally untrue advice set me off.

‘Oh no?’ I said. ‘Isn’t worrying about things that haven’t happened yet the purpose of several major government agencies, like the army and FEMA? What about yearly checkups? Savings accounts? Tornado shelters? Earthquake-proofing?’

‘Moisturizer?’ Joan added.

‘You’re a math professor,’ I said. ‘What the study of probability? Figuring out what will *probably* happen. And then you dump all of that probability information into huge tables that insurance companies use. So they know who will probably crash their car, which places will probably get flooded, who might trip into the fireplace and set themselves on fire...’

‘I don’t think there’s a category for that, Jane.’

‘You see my point,’ I said archly. ‘Of *course* we know bad things do happen. And I know that Allison is probably going to spaz. She will probably start talking about her collection of Build-A-Bears or quoting entire episodes of *Charmed*, and while I think she’s cute, most people will think she’s insane and they will run.’

I was getting a little frenzied now. Joan was nodding away, like I was preaching and she had been infected by the spirit — but my dad was still back a few steps.

‘But she hasn’t done any of that yet,’ he said. ‘If you go into it with that attitude, there’s almost no point. Probability isn’t a guarantee. Give her some credit. You have to assume that she’ll do just fine.’

‘But she *won’t*.’

‘Well, then,’ my dad said, quietly folding his completed puzzle in half, ‘sounds like she had no chance in the first place. So I guess...’

He stood and flicked a lost Froot Loop over at Joan.

‘...you’ll just have to save her from herself.’